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U.S. Finds It Tough to Keep the Gulf at Arm's Length

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

THE extension of the Persian Gulf conflict beyond the boundaries of Iran and Iraq raised serious problems for the Reagan Administration last week. Increasing tensions, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, seemed to increase the chances that the United States could be drawn directly, albeit reluctantly, into the war. Washington was already deeply involved indirectly through its military assistance to Saudi Arabia and political support for Iraq.

Members of Congress reminded the Administration that, as supplier of Awacs electronic command planes and KC-10 aerial tankers to the Saudis, the Administration already looked like a combatant to the Iranians. Saudi officials acknowledged that their F-15's would not have been able to shoot down Iranian planes without information from the Awacs and aerial refueling.

Both sides were using American-made planes. The Iranians, who were major purchasers during the Shah's reign, rely on 20 to 30 old F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers, with reconnaissance by a dozen remaining advanced F-14 fighters equipped with sophisticated radar. The Saudis, who have replaced Teheran as the prime purchaser of American military equipment in the Persian Gulf, have 60 F-15's and larger numbers of older F-5's. Sales of American arms in the Gulf have been sharply criticized by Israel and its supporters in Congress who fear their eventual use against Israeli targets.

"We are going to be at war with Iran, not necessarily in the Gulf, but at the Olympics and other places like that," a former Central Intelligence Agency official said after the Saudis shot down two Iranian planes. He meant that the Iranians, having been set back by the Saudi-American connection, might be planning to retaliate at a place and time of their choosing. What they lack in firepower, they make up in the dedication of followers willing to carry out terrorist actions such as the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks near Beirut in October.

"The mistake of Western analysts is that they always stress the (lack of) military equipment and tools of Iran and are not informed of the pivotal point of this revolution, which is the religious zeal of the people," Hojatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, was reported to have said last week.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz says the United

States would be willing to act against state-directed terrorism. But would that include direct attacks on Iran? No such decision has yet been reached, Administration officials said.

In view of Iran's difficulties in keeping its planes in the air and the newly demonstrated Saudi resoluteness, officials in Washington seemed less fearful than formerly that Iran might launch attacks against Saudi oilfields and other hard-to-protect targets. Such attacks could lead to a request for United States planes to enter the fray. But the ability of the Saudi Air Force to meet the Iranians and prevail demonstrated that at least some Saudis were willing to take risks in their defense, making an appeal for American help less likely.

Concern About Stingers

Washington is committed to preserving the stability of the Government in Riyadh and the flow of oil from the Gulf to Western markets. The stakes are high enough to make American entry into the conflict conceivable. Also, some officials would not mind the chance to avenge Iran's treatment of American hostages five years ago.

But the official line minimizes the possibility of a combat role. "Only as a last resort would the United States consider direct military involvement — and then only in appropriate circumstances and if we were asked to do so," Michael H. Armacost, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, assured a Senate subcommittee. The senators were unanimous in expressing concern about where the 400 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles recently delivered to the Saudis would end up, and where the Administration's willingness to fulfill Saudi requests would take the United States.

Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, was worried about increasing American involve-

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ment. Several senators said the War Powers Act should be invoked because of the part played by the Awacs and aerial tankers in downing the Iranian planes. But the Administration, seeking to minimize anxiety in this election year, said there had been no chance that Americans would be hit. The Awacs and the refueling planes fly considerable distances from the combat, Mr. Armacost said.

The war last week followed the pattern of recent incidents. A Turkish tanker was hit by the Iraqis when it ventured into the 50-mile "exclusion zone" they have established around Kharg Island, Iran's chief oil export terminal. Iran still had 300,000 to 500,000 troops near the Iraqi border leading some — but not all — analysts to predict that the long-expected "human wave" attack was imminent. Iraq bombed the Iranian city of Baneh, according to the Iranians, killing and wounding 600 people. That touched off Iranian shelling of Iraqi border cities, again with many casualties reported.

On the diplomatic front, special envoys from Algeria last week appealed unavailingly to Iran to negotiate a settlement. But Teheran was still insisting on the ouster of Iraq's President Saddam Hussein as a precondition for negotiations.

"All of the people who have a capacity to talk to either side just get nowhere with Iran in terms of trying to get it worked out," Mr. Shultz said.